

AN EASTER SERMON  
I Corinthians 15:51-58  
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"Death is dead...Death is dead"; so says Lazarus in Eugene O'Neill's play, Lazarus Laughed. The man who was raised from the dead by Jesus of Nazareth disappears from the Gospel narrative. But in O'Neill's play he travels to Greece and there, by chance, encounters Gaius Caligula, the mad and cruel successor to Tiberius Caesar. "So you're the man who teaches people to laugh at death," the Emperor says and threatens to have Lazarus executed once and for all. But Lazarus, laughing softly "like a man in love with God" answers, "Death is dead, Caligula. Death is dead." (See John Sutherland Bonnell, I Believe in Immortality, p. 90-91).

Speaking the same language, Juergen Moltmann, contemporary German theologian, in his most recent book writes, "Easter hymns have celebrated the victory of life by laughing at death...Easter sermons in the Middle Ages are said to have begun with good jokes...Laughter disarms a threat by taking away its seriousness. When people can laugh they can no longer be threatened or blackmailed." (The Passion for Life, p.74).

Reading those two vignettes this week: from O'Neill's play and the heavier theology of the German scholar, I discovered why I love I Corinthians 15 so much. It is essentially theological laughter - "O death, where is thy sting?" It is the original Easter joke - "O grave, where is thy victory?" It is the very Easter hymn - "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory." It is the original Easter sermon: "therefore, be steadfast, immovable...knowing that your work is not in vain."

It is one of the texts George Frederick Handel set to music near the end of his soaring masterpiece, Messiah. Evan Whallon, Columbus Symphony Director, told us last Sunday how Handel's servant came into the room as the master had finished the Hallelujah Chorus and found him with tears in his eyes, transfixed. Handel said, "I thought I did see the great God himself." Lovers of the Messiah are inclined to agree. But I think Handel was nowhere more inspired than when he took this text from I Corinthians, "O Death, where is thy sting; O Grave, where is thy victory," and wrote it into a lilting, almost playful duet. It could have been terribly severe and ponderous. But Handel wrote it with a twinkle in his eye; a kind of musical joke.

Now ordinarily we try to have our Easter joy without much laughter because somewhere along the way we learned that important things are serious things, that laughter is trivial, if not banal; that something as important as a proposed resurrection of the dead requires serious and hard thinking, not soft laughter. And so we try to be happy but what we're really doing all the while is working very hard intellectually, trying to think this thing through; attempting to find some intellectual category in which it will fit, some logical explanation that will allow for it, even though we never saw a resurrection or knew anyone who did.

The trouble is that no matter how hard we think about it there is only one verifiable, provable fact. That fact is that the friends of Jesus came to the conclusion that He had risen from His grave. There are other quasi-verifiable bits of the story. No one seriously suggests that there wasn't a Jesus. Most serious historians concur that He was probably executed, and that the Romans weren't inclined to botch the job. But after that things become opaque rather quickly. The resurrection of Jesus Christ can be argued, debated, discussed. It cannot be proved. But - and we seem to forget this part of it - neither can it be disproved.

The simple fact is that empirical knowledge, the way you and I know most of what we know, doesn't help us much here. There are no pictures, no writings with His signature, no records, no artifacts, and unlike Tutankhamen, no remains. There is no empirical data, except this stubborn conviction of His friends, and while that is quite a bit, it is not cold, hard fact. "Therefore", the modern intellect reasons, "in the absence of empirical data we conclude that the resurrection is a metaphor. It means that Jesus lives on in His immortal teaching." The empirical way of thinking also breaks down at that point when each of us confesses, "It couldn't have happened. There is no way a dead body can get up and walk, God's son or not. Death is death, and that's that." Unless, of course, death is dead; but here comes that soft laughter again and we're not quite finished with our serious thinking.

It always seems to me worth remembering on Easter that the friends of Jesus had trouble believing it too. They didn't know everything we know about science and medicine and cause and effect. They were not privy to the same technological sophistication as we are. But one thing is certain; they knew that dead people stay dead. They didn't want to believe it either. Nothing in their own religion even suggested that it might happen. Nothing about the current hope for the Messiah remotely approached the matter of a resurrection. The Gospel accounts are embarrassingly candid: they didn't want to believe, couldn't believe, wouldn't believe, one of them insisted, until he touched and felt the phenomenon. I think it's worth remembering that the earliest belief in the resurrection was as reluctant as our own.

I also think it is important to remember that while our concern focuses on the act of resurrection itself and the mystery of an empty tomb, and proceeds to build arguments on those two premises, the New Testament is concerned mainly with another matter altogether; namely, the experience of those early believers that they were living in a new era, that they were now part of God's Kingdom, that they were gloriously free and eternally safe from harm. There is a lot of that in the New Testament and nothing at all about the kinds of questions we love to ask.

And so we may have to deal with the suggestion that our way of seeing, perceiving and knowing may not be adequate. It may not even be relevant. Wolfhart Pannenberg, another one of those scholarly German theologians, not given to romanticism or mysticism, wrote: "Up to a recent date it has been repeatedly said that (the resurrection) would violate the laws of nature. But contemporary physicists have become much more careful before making such statements, not because of microphysical results but because of a more precise consciousness of the fact that general laws do not make possible an absolutely certain prediction about the possibility of single events." (Christianity Today, April 6, 1979, p.16). What that means is that science is no longer claiming that what it knows for sure is the only thing there is to know.

Interestingly, you don't have to hide your convictions about the mysteries of religion: the profound mystery of God, life, Christ, resurrection from scientists any more. They are among the first to suggest that the world we see, touch and feel may not be the whole of reality. In fact, the more we know and discover about this incredible physical scheme of things, the more the scientists start sounding like theologians. Einstein himself, while no traditional pietist, to be sure, wrote that serious science leads inevitably to the conclusion that there is a higher wisdom; that we are not alone. And, as any school boy knows, that is really the fundamental matter; once you allow room in your scheme of things for God, all sorts of things become possibilities.

Somewhere we got the idea that it is smarter to be a skeptic. That intelligence and atheism go together. That logic is on the side of death. That religion is kid stuff. How odd that science is asking us to think that one through again.

One thing of which we should not be guilty on this day, and that is to try to have our Christianity without resurrection. My first teacher of theology - my first encounter with a world-class theological intellect was a charming Englishman by the name of Whale; J.S. Whale. He looked like every caricature of an English gentleman I had ever seen. He spoke and wrote beautifully and every Easter I get out his little volume on Christian Doctrine and read again what he says about the resurrection. "Belief in the Resurrection is not an appendage to the Christian faith: it is the Christian faith... It is not tacked on to the Gospel story to make a happy ending, or to hide what, without it, would be the supreme tragedy of history; it is implicit in the story from the beginning. It is from the foundation of the world." (p.73).

Yet the questions were raised early in the story. Thomas was the first, but certainly not the last person to stumble over the resurrection. St. Paul doesn't bother to tell us what was going on in Corinth: he thought, after all, that he was writing a letter, not a book of the Bible. But apparently some of those first Christians were having trouble with the resurrection, trouble believing it, trouble understanding what it meant, and most of all trouble with its centrality for Paul. "Can't we have the Gospel without this part?" they asked. And so the Apostle wrote it all down, and it isn't terribly logical and it isn't sequential and it gives one a headache to work with it for very long. But the 15th chapter of his first Letter to the Corinthians is the very first Christian writing about the resurrection. The conclusion, the Post Script, I think, is the best part; the most provocative.

"Lo, I tell you a mystery." Not, "I'm going to explain it to you" - but "tell you a mystery." The very last words reveal the problem the Corinthians were having and that we continue to have. It's like that little game Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon play on the Tonight Show. Carson has the answers sealed in envelopes; and must deduce what the questions are. Paul's answer is, "Be steadfast, immovable... knowing that your work is not in vain."

The question the Corinthian Christians asked was about the meaning of life in light of death. The simple, timeless truth of the matter is that death always has called into question human hopes, dreams, loves, aspirations, accomplishments. All of it is swallowed up. In fact, our work is in vain, or so it seems. Everything we do is going to end up in the same condition that waits for us - death.

The simple, timeless truth is that we ask the same question those brothers and sisters in the first century asked. Is there any hope? Is this life of ours going to amount to a thing? Is there anything permanent about it? Anything lastingly significant about it?

We ask that question on two levels, I believe. On the broad, historical level, we catch ourselves wondering whether there will be a future for the human race. The Three Mile Island nuclear accident illustrated the tentative hold we have on our situation; how actually close we are to poisoning ourselves out of existence. George Gallup found recently that most Americans look to the immediate future with fear.

We ask the question of life and death on the broad, historical level. Is there any hope? Is there anything enduring and lasting about our civilization? More poignantly, however, we ask that same question personally, about ourselves, but mostly about ourselves in relation to people we love. Is there anything enduring here? Or is this, too, swallowed up in death?

I received a letter several months ago that put it as plainly as possible. It was from a young woman whose grandmother had died. She has given me permission to quote her letter. She wrote: "Since her death I have been struggling with a question. Maybe you can help. Grandmother's death has hit me hard. She was very special to me. Outside of the mere shock and sadness I have felt, her death has shaken me to a realization first of man's mortality and the preciousness of life, and then, through that, the realization of a bigger world beyond...Grandmother is so permanent to me."

The writer of that letter put in words both the honest despair, but undying hope of the human heart. She felt drawn to faith, not by fear. She did not use religion as a crutch to guarantee her own immortality as the skeptic always suggests. Instead, the death of someone she loved compelled her to rethink the whole matter. It wasn't philosophy that precipitated her thinking, but a relationship, a good, loving, healing human relationship.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the bold suggestion that the best about us does not die: that our work is not in vain, our dearest loves, our noblest dreams, our significant accomplishments. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the bold shout of victory: death itself is swallowed up, gone. Life is more powerful, more real, more fundamental. The enduring realities are God's own. We can be - steadfast, immovable...confident, strong - laughing softly ... death is dead.

The enemy has no power, and there is nothing funnier than that. The threat of death is always the oppressor. Dictators know that. Caligula said to Lazarus, "Lazarus, you have killed my dearest friend." Hitler orchestrated fear like a master. All human oppression is grounded in the fear of death and the power of the oppressor to kill. But there are other forms as well. The threat of death makes us vulnerable to the oppression we call security. We will do anything to guarantee it, which is another way of trying to nail down our immortality. We will spend a life trying to make a name, or climb a ladder or build an estate. And what it all amounts to is the oppression of the threat of our own death.

"We hope", someone wrote recently, "because we believe in our own resurrection." A child said it profoundly, but simply, in a bit of graffiti scribbled on a colored egg - "If Jesus can do it, so can you!" O'Neill said it dramatically, "Death is dead, Caligula. Death is dead," laughing softly like a man in love with God.

And Malcolm Muggeridge, elegantly, in his old age, meandering through the graveyard in Sussex where his father lies, leaning on the very stone and thinking out loud...

"From my earliest years I've been much given to thinking about death...This might seem in contemporary terms a melancholy, if not unmentionable case to be in...I, on the contrary, find it very uplifting, like the close of a June day, a distillation as it were, of everything most beautiful and most loving in what has gone before. Death is a beginning, not an end...I say over to myself John Donne's splendid words: 'Death, thou shalt die. In the graveyard, the dust settles; in the city of God, eternity begins'." (A Twentieth Century Testimony).

St. Paul would like that way of saying it. St. Paul, who with a twinkle in his eye, dashed off that Post Script which is the first and best of all Easter messages -

"O death, where is thy victory?  
O death, where is thy sting?  
Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory in our Lord Jesus Christ.  
Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast,  
immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord,  
knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."  
Amen.

God our Father, our minds stretch to comprehend the meaning of this day. Give us moments of laughter. Deliver us from working so hard at believing and grant us courage to embrace it, and weep in joy about it, and sing it. O God, hear our praise and our gratitude for Jesus Christ who was dead, but is alive forever.

Amen.